Axelson Center Presentation
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Many people my age learned basic philanthropy, modestly, in the form of a peculiar little object: a box of small envelopes sent to our family from our church, for our weekly offerings — our contribution. That little box of envelopes sat on our kitchen table, I recall, between the salt and pepper and the paper napkin holder. They were a reminder, 24/7, that the Buchanan family had responsibilities beyond the sustenance of our own lives: shelter, food, clothing. It was, in many respects — relative to the life most of us are privileged to live today, economically modest, limited, sometimes precarious. Periodic layoffs by the Pennsylvania Railroad, for which my father worked, meant periodic unemployment, no income other than unemployment insurance, and occasionally government surplus cheese, powdered milk and beef stew which, I recall, had a startling resemblance to and odor of canned dog food. Nevertheless, the little envelopes were filled weekly: in lean times left in the box empty, for the return of a paycheck, at which time we made it up. On occasion, in good times, Mother would fill the envelopes ahead 2 or 3 weeks.

It was cash — and modest. We're talking about a dollar or two per week. I'm not aware that we gave money to anything else: the occasional PTA membership, the Boy Scouts magazine sale: certainly not museum, symphony, ballet or university. But the placing of a dollar or two in the little envelope week in and week out was an important part of the ethos of that family. And when I was old enough to join the church and receive my own little box of envelopes, I placed it beside my family's box and discovered that it was in fact a pleasant experience to put 15¢ or a quarter of my own hard-earned money from delivering newspapers, shoveling walks, cutting lawns, in my own envelope.

Because money was scarce they discussed it occasionally. And while we were not particularly pious — or zealous — a zealous Presbyterian, after all, is something of an oxymoron: we know ourselves, after all, as "the Frozen Chosen" — I recall then saying that this was important and we must do it.

And so I learned basic philanthropy: the notion that I have responsibilities beyond my own maintenance and amusement: that somehow something bigger than I: the community, the common good, in my case, my church, was dependent on me.

In the context of “Strategies for Dealing with Generational and Demographic Change,” we must acknowledge that my modest and somewhat idyllic paradigm has pretty much disappeared. This is not about religion or church, but the truth is that there is a generation, now a sequence of generations, that did not have the experience I had. Basic training in generosity, responsibility and philanthropy had to happen somewhere else.

At the same time something very interesting is happening: something I call the “Return of the Boomer, Yuppies, Gen Xers, et. al.”

I’m not sure you can measure it statistically yet, but at places like Willow Creek, Old St. Pat’s and Fourth Presbyterian something very interesting is occurring: young adults are coming back — or coming home. The phenomenon on why they left — has occupied the work of some of our best thinkers. Robert Bellah argued that in the last decades of the 20th century a major shift became increasingly visible in the very heart of American culture from community to individual, from concern about others to self-concern. Bellah called it the New Narcissism: and it manifested itself in many ways: “Do Yourself a Favor Today: This Bud’s for You” — it’s global: in Italy recently I saw an Italian adolescent with a T-shirt that asserted, in glittery red letters: “I Want Everything. Is there a Problem with That?” It had — and has — enormous institutional implications. Bellah conducted many interviews in the process of his social analysis. One interview, a now famous Californian by the name of Sheila, told him she no longer attended church but she was religious. “My religion,” she said, “is my own little voice. I call it ‘Sheilaism.’”

Robert Putnam’s now familiar study “Bowling Alone” demonstrated that the shift from community to individual thinking provided a significant drop in participation in communal activities: membership in the PTA, YMCA, Red Cross, Church — and Bowling Leagues had dropped precipitously.

Wade Clark Roof’s analysis — focusing on the spirituality of the age — and by the way, while participation in organized religion may be down, spirituality is up, very up. Everyone is spiritual, if not religious: more people than ever are reading about, thinking about spirituality, meditating, journaling, channeling, chanting, watching Oprah, than ever. But Roof argues that it is a generation of seekers not joiners. There is something about the age that is leading people to ask questions of meaning and value and purpose.

Those are the people who are showing up in the pews of Fourth Presbyterian Church — seekers. They come without much of a history: they don't know the traditions, stories, hymns, creeds and prayers. In fact they find all that "church stuff" off-putting. When it comes time to put money in the offering plate they drop a $5 bill in. And when they are asked to make a significant financial commitment — they don't understand and don't respond.

The good news is "they're back." Increasingly they're living in the city — a demographic change no one anticipated — families with children deciding to live in the city — where it is difficult to remain in your cocoon for long.

Philosopher/Theologian Douglas John Hall says that all of us, but particularly contemporary, post-modern young adults are looking for 4 things:

- a sense of mystery and transcendence
- authenticity
- community relationships that sustain and nurture
- to make a difference

I think he's right and I see reasons to be hopeful about the entire not-for-profit enterprise.

My supporting evidence is the 400 mostly young women and men who volunteer to be Tutors in the Tutoring Program at Fourth Presbyterian Church. Most of them are not church members — many will join — but when they volunteer they are highly motivated, energetic, successful professionals who, I believe, have discovered the moral bankruptcy represented by the Italian T-shirt: "I Want Everything. Is There a Problem with That?" . . . have discovered that yes, there is a big problem with that. They are seeking meaning, purpose, to make a difference, if you will, and they are quite willing to be challenged — mentored — taught — to rise above and out of self absorption and to actually entertain the idea that the very best, highest and ultimately happiest thing any of us can do is to love our neighbors as ourselves.